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THE CUBAN SANDHILL CRANE AS UMBRELLA SPECIES: RELATIONSHIP WITH PLANT DIVERSITY IN THREATENED WHITE SAND SAVANNAHS

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Abstract: This project describes relationships between the Cuban sandhill crane (*Grus canadensis nesiotus*) distribution and habitat use and plant diversity in white sand savannas, a threatened ecosystem in Cuba. Data are based on habitat use and selection of 10 radio-tagged sandhill cranes in the Los Indios Ecological reserve, Isle of Youth. We used Arcview and satellite imagery to map broad vegetation categories. Within the general Pine-Palm savannas specific plant communities were characterized using species composition and dominant plant life forms. Habitat types most used by cranes for feeding and nesting were also those with highest plant species richness and diversity, particularly of shrubs. Habitat used by cranes also had a greater number and proportion of endemic plant species. Our results suggest that focusing conservation on areas used by Cuban sandhill cranes may serve to protect plant species diversity in the same areas and may help in protecting areas with significant levels of endemic plants.

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Key words: Cuba, Cuban sandhill crane, *Grus canadensis nesiotus*, habitat use, plant diversity, white sand savannas.
